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CONTACT: Bridget McNie
For Robot 250
412-224-6006
bridgetm@jackhorner.com

Dennis Bateman
Robot 250 Project Director
412-268-5767
dbateman@cs.cmu.edu

Robot 250 turns Pittsburgh communities into a living, breathing, robot learning lab
Workshops all over Pittsburgh teach kids of all ages about technology literacy, and challenge the clichéd notion of what a robot is and does

Pittsburgh – April XX, 2008 – Don't worry about robots coming to Pittsburgh--they're already here. In fact, over the past year, people of all ages signed on for 13 community workshops and created robots to do their community's bidding.

The workshops are a part of Robot 250, a massive city-wide community art and technology program culminating in a two-week festival in July with exhibits, workshops, outdoor displays, movies and other installations throughout the Pittsburgh area. Robot 250 is fun for the entire community and makes robotic technology more accessible and engaging for the general public.

Rather than a predetermined, uniform-outcome project kit, Robot 250 community workshops provided the background, technology and raw materials, but left the direction and creation of the final robots up to the participants.

"People are talking about what kind of a robot would fit into their neighborhoods," said Illah Nourbakhsh, an associate professor at Carnegie Mellon University's Robotics Institute and one of the visionaries behind Robot 250. "Kids can build a device to test air quality, which plays right into the needs of people with asthma. In Lawrenceville, they're talking about using sensors to monitor sound: when noise gets too loud, the robot sends out an alert."

Homewood Teens Explore East-End Heritage and Pollution Control

In 2007, two Robot 250 workshops for middle and high school girls were coordinated by Brushton-Homewood YMCA/YWCA teen program coordinators Laleita Small and Stacy DelleDonne.

"We met for two sessions per week," said Small. "The first session of each week we had a Carnegie Mellon professor explaining the technology. During the second session we were on our own, and we'd take field trips to different sites in the East-End."

Girls in the summer workshop worked as a team and decided their robot could help document the history and heritage of Pittsburgh's East-End neighborhoods. Interviews with long-time residents and photos of historic sites using GigaPan robotic camera technology were combined to take a critical look at issues about race, segregation and their community.

"I think it showed them they're a part of something that's bigger than themselves," said Small.

In the fall workshop, the girls became advocates for pollution control. They toured East-End neighborhoods, noting what they saw, heard and smelled. Back at the workshop at the YWCA, the teams then configured their robot models with Canary sensors, which can monitor noise, and air pollution. One of those robots resembled the child's toy, Mr. Potato Head, and would flail its arms to alert people when noise levels exceeded set levels.

Robots Monitor Traffic Safety in Lawrenceville

A workshop in Lawrenceville last summer brought together residents – fifth-graders to retirees – for weekly sessions to learn how robotics could benefit their community.

"We were able to bring the community together to learn a bit about new and novel technologies and apply an issue or interest to that community," said Carl DiSalvo, another visionary behind Robot 250 and Assistant Professor at the School of Literature, Communication and Culture at The Georgia Institute of Technology. One of the issues Lawrenceville residents could agree on was the need for traffic calming.

"We had a whole variety of devices that were reporting on speeding," said DiSalvo, who coordinated the Lawrenceville Open Studio workshop. One of the robots devised by his workshop participants worked from a model of a Lawrenceville street. The robot would sense a speeding vehicle and drop a flag into the street to warn drivers and onlookers of dangerous conditions.

More on Robot 250

The GigaPan and Canary technologies used by students, artists and community members in the workshops and open studios are not yet available to the general public. This provided a unique opportunity for participants to be in on the ground floor of emerging technologies and programming, and afforded researchers at Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh a chance to observe first-adopters for an extended period.

Robot 250 coincides with Pittsburgh's 250th anniversary and was launched by Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh with program support from a host of local community groups and financial support from The Heinz Endowments, The Grable Foundation and The Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation.

About Robot 250

Robot 250 is a city-wide community art and technology program designed in conjunction with Pittsburgh's 250th anniversary, that has turned Pittsburgh into a living, breathing learning lab by enabling

students, families, artists and the public to build their own customized robots. Launched by Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh with support from The Andy Warhol Museum, The Brew House Association, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Museum of Art, Carnegie Science Center, The Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, CitiParks, CMITES, Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, The Mattress Factory, Neighborhood Nets, Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, PPG Plaza, YouthPlaces and the YWCA and YMCA. Robot 250 is fun for the entire community and makes robotic technology more accessible and useful for the general public. Robot 250 is a year-long program that culminates in mid-July with a two-week event filled with a wide range of family activities, including hands-on workshops, student and artist exhibits and film presentations. The event will also include giant robotic "BigBot" installations that will be displayed throughout the city.

For more information on Robot 250 visit www.robot250.org

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Available for interviews: Illah Nourbakhsh, Carl DiSalvo and many participants are available to speak about their experience with Robot 250 community workshops. To schedule an interview, please call Bridget McNie at 412-224-6006 or e-mail bridgetm@jackhorner.com